

Belgian general strike diary, 1960 - Maurice Brinton



Maurice Brinton's vivid and captivating first hand account of the massive general strike in Belgium in 1960-61 against a new law "loi unique" to reduce workers' purchasing power.

THE BELGIAN GENERAL STRIKE: DIARY DECEMBER 28-31, 1960

THE BACKGROUND

In 1950 a general strike had led to the abdication of King Leopold. In 1958- 59 workers, and in fact whole villages, had taken part in widespread strikes and struggles in protest at the closing of the nationalized Borinage coalfields. The strike of 1960-61 was the culmination of a growing movement of social protest that had been building up over many years. The economic situation of Belgium had been slowly deteriorating. The last and most drastic attempt to improve it at the expense of the working class, was the introduction of the loi unique, which cut into workers' purchasing power and threatened their conditions of work. On December 14, 1960, a one-day demonstration was called by the Socialist Party and the trade unions to protest against this law. It met with tremendous success. On December 20, the day the debate on the law began in Parliament the municipal workers came out on official, nationwide, strike. While most of the other unions were discussing what to do next a spontaneous movement of unparalleled extent swept the country like a tidal wave. The official strike call, which came a few days later was the endorsement of an accomplished fact. Within a week nearly a million workers were out.

BRUSSELS, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 28

11.00 am

This is the seventh day of the struggle. At the Air Terminal, the escalator is not moving. Current, says the Government, must be economized. Buses and trams have stopped. Refuse blows along pavements that have not been swept for days. The weather is clear and sunny, but very cold. A few people hurry about their business. There seem to be plenty of cars. Petrol distribution is not seriously affected. In the Air Terminal windows, an enormous



Belgian general strike diary, 1960 - Maurice

Brinton

Maurice Brinton's vivid and captivating first hand account of the massive general strike in Belgium in 1960-61 against a new law "loi unique" to reduce workers' purchasing power.

THE BELGIAN GENERAL STRIKE: DIARY DECEMBER 28-31, 1960

THE BACKGROUND

In 1950 a general strike had led to the abdication of King Leopold. In 1958- 59 workers, and in fact whole villages, had taken part in widespread strikes and struggles in protest at the closing of the nationalized Borinage coalfields. The strike of 1960-61 was the culmination of a growing movement of social protest that had been building up over many years. The economic situation of Belgium had been slowly deteriorating. The last and most drastic attempt to improve it at the expense of the working class, was the introduction of the loi unique, which cut into workers' purchasing power and threatened their conditions of work.

On December 14, 1960, a one-day demonstration was called by the Socialist Party and the trade unions to protest against this law. It met with tremendous success. On December 20, the day the debate on the law began in Parliament the municipal workers came out on official, nationwide, strike. While most of the other unions were discussing what to do next a spontaneous movement of unparalleled extent swept the country like a tidal wave. The official strike call, which came a few days later was the endorsement of an accomplished fact.

Within a week nearly a million workers were out.

BRUSSELS, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 28

11.00 am

This is the seventh day of the struggle. At the Air Terminal, the escalator is not moving.

Current, says the Government, must be economized. Buses and trams have stopped. Refuse blows along pavements that have not been swept for days. The weather is clear and sunny, but very cold. A few people hurry about their business. There seem to be plenty of cars.

Petrol distribution is not seriously affected. In the Air Terminal windows, an enormous

portrait of the recently married royal couple. This is a bit provocative, I feel, and unlikely to endure.

The Central Railway Station is almost deserted. Out of curiosity, I walk in. Well provided with light weapons, small groups of soldiers in green and brown camouflage uniform stand disconsolately about. In the poorly lit central hall an enormous blackboard announces: "In view of the social conflict, no communications can be ensured in any direction". People walk up to it, stare, read it once, twice, three times ...and walk silently away. One ticket kiosk is open. "A train to Liege?" "No, Sir. We have no information, Sir. If you would call again in a couple of hours, Sir, we may know something more. We cannot guarantee that you will arrive, Sir". I wonder whether the man behind the counter is obsequious because he is a scab or whether it's the other way around.

At a little kiosk I buy a copy of Le Peuple, the official organ of the Belgian Socialist Party (PSB). It announces a big demonstration for that morning. At the Maison du Peuple, the party headquarters, I am told the direction the procession has moved. After an hour I catch up as it is about to disperse. About two or three thousand people are still thronging a broad crossroads. A tram has been surrounded and its front windows smashed. The crowd is swarming around another tram. Posters proclaim, "No, to the New Law" and "Why must we always pay?". "Eyskens, resign", chants the crowd in rhythm. Other groups are shouting,

"Eyskens, to the gallows". There are masses of young people there. Two hefty-looking lads, one about 25, the other older, tell me they are tram drivers. This is the first day of a token strike of the Brussels tramwaymen. All the tram l workers belonging to the Brussels FGTB 1

have been called out. The Catholic trade union has instructed its members to remain at work.

For psychological reasons, they tell me, all the scabs have been concentrated on the 6.00 am shift, "to give the public an impression that many trams are still running".

"Look", they say, "they have taken out the smallest trams they could and the ones in the worst state of repair. They would never allow an old tram like that on the lines in ordinary times.

They won't run them for long. There's a rule that if for any reason, a tram window is broken, the vehicle must return to the depot". "If it can", chipped in the other, laughing.

The crowd starts marching down one of the main shopping streets, singing the Internationale.

The police half-heartedly throw a cordon of about thirty men across it. They are only one deep. Good-humouredly the crowd turns the edges of the cordon, or even walks straight through it, and proceeds down the boulevard, singing, laughing and shouting. I see the banners of the Socialist Youth. They are very interested to learn how closely some people in Britain have been following their struggle. Fraternal bonds are established within minutes.

"This is something", one of them says, "that neither your rulers nor ours will ever understand".

2.00 pm

The Socialist Youth (Jeunes Gardes Socialistes) are very helpful. Mobilized since the struggle began, their working headquarters is a long, dark room in a little side street just behind the Maison du Peuple. It is a constant hive of activity. One of the comrades accompanies me to their official office in the party headquarters. I am given my passport to Socialist Belgium: a letter of introduction from the Jeunes Gardes.

The comrade then takes me to the national FGTB headquarters, a massive modern well-equipped building, just like "official" trade union headquarters anywhere else. The walls are hung with large portraits of the aged and bearded founders of the Belgian labour and trade union movement I am introduced to Andre Renard's secretary. Renard is assistant secretary of the FCITB and is generally regarded as the official spokesman of its "left" wing, a kind of Belgian Frank Cousins, with a big following in the industrial region around Liege. I explain

my purpose to her. Our interview is constantly interrupted by incoming and outgoing telephone calls, themselves a time consuming procedure. The conversations are constantly interrupted or branched on to wrong numbers. The grossly restricted staff of scabs at the Central Telephone Exchange must be having an exhausting time. At the FGTB the delays are accepted with patience and a sort of amused pride. "In Brussels, everything is normal", the wireless has just announced. I reflect on the multiple aspects of a telephonists' strike in a period of mass social upheaval.

Finally I meet Andre' Renard for a few minutes. Here is the "anarchist", the "revolutionary", the actual villain in the eyes of the screaming bourgeois press. Looking younger than his years, an immensely self-confident man, he is obviously aware of the tremendous strength of several hundred thousand miners and metal workers in the Walloon area. At least for the time being they seem to speak one language and I he appears to be the embodiment of their will to struggle.

He assures me that I will encounter no difficulties from the strike pickets and trade unions in the Walloon area and wishes me good luck in my tour. "fell your

readers that we will fight this to the end", he says. His secretary appends a few lines to my "pass" which is now an open-sesame to strike-bound Belgium. We leave. "No applications in writing! No referral of the matter to this or that sub-committee!", I comment to my young friend, delighted at the informality and helpfulness just encountered. "They have to...now", he answered. 9.00 pm.

With the picket, outside the Brussels Main Post Office and Sorting Station. This is an enormous modern building some 500 yards long and perhaps ten storeys high. Half an hour ago the postmen's delegate had called at the Socialist Youth Headquarters asking for reinforcements. A dozen comrades quickly go there. Soon we are joined by other hastily summoned reinforcements.

The majority of the 2,000 postal workers attached to the office have been on strike for about a week. The scabs are still working protected by tommy-gun carrying parachutists and gendarmes. All the sorting of incoming and outgoing mail for the Brussels area takes place here. Only one entrance is in use, for both pedestrians and vehicles. This leads under an arch and into a small yard and is very heavily guarded. Between 9.00 and 9.30 pm the shifts change. Work at the office goes on around the clock. The authorities seem well aware of the importance of maintaining even a skeleton staff. Fast-moving heavily guarded lorries carry the scabs in and out.

They are loudly booed. The picket, which numbers perhaps fifty people, is not allowed within eighty yards of the entrance to the depot and contact, verbal or physical, with the scabs is not possible. Such is the present relation of forces. At the moment, little can be done to alter it.

The lads on the picket seem however just as aware as the authorities of the necessity to maintain a substantial picket. I am repeatedly told it is one of the key points of the strike in the Brussels area. It is extremely cold. We walk up and down, along the pavement, between the arrival and departure of the scab lorries. Only a small minority of the picket seem to be post office workers. The rest are militants from other unions, the Socialist Party and the Jeunes Gardes.

I interview a young postal worker, who has worked for Eve years at this depot. He tells me that for the first few days there was a massive picket of post-office workers. "But there were too many troops. We now only send a token picket. We know who's working".

I question him about the organization of the post office workers at this depot (Bruxelles X -

Bureau de Tri). About fifty percent apparently belong to the Centrale Generale des Services Publics, an affiliate of the FGTB. About thirty percent belong to the Catholic Confederation Syndicale Chretienne. The others are either not in unions or are members of the syndicats

neutres. He tells me that in the FGTB, to which he belongs, there are no regular branch meetings for the workers in his department. Every so often, when important decisions have to be imparted on the men, the union leaders convene a meeting. Such meetings may be attended by up to eighty percent of the men. "The leaders tell us what we have to decide.

Then they take the temperature of the meeting. If there is massive opposition, things are modified". I ask him if there are ever mass meetings of all the workers employed in a given department or section, irrespective of their particular union affiliation. No, he says. He agrees it would be a good idea. "We are very divided. It weakens us". He had been in the Socialist Youth movement but now concerns himself exclusively with trade union matters. He has heard of and is interested in the British Shop Stewards" Movement. He tells me how union delegates are elected at his place of work.

There are yearly elections to determine the distribution of delegates, between the various unions "catering" for post office workers. "In a given office, the elections may show that FGTB will be allocated three delegates, the Christians two, the others one. The l FGTB will then assemble its supporters separately, to elect its three delegates". These are not revocable during their tenure in office. "We don't see as much of them as we would like".

At this stage a platoon of about twenty gendarmes marches past us on the pavement. They are greeted with a resounding Internationale. They glare at us as they march by.

10.30 pm

General Assembly at the Socialist Youth Headquarters, About forty young comrades are present, sitting on crates and chairs in various states of disrepair. About a third of them are girls. No one seems much over thirty. A single light. The corners of the room are in darkness.

On one side a big stove. On the walls posters of the Algerian Revolution, posters relating to their own activities and a portrait of Lenin.

Earlier that afternoon they had met and discussed what they would do the following day.

Certain slogans had been collectively decided upon: "Eyskens to the gallows" - "For a strike to the finish" - "The bankers must pay"- "The soldiers are with us"- "The factories to the workers". Two comrades had been delegated to contact Communist Youth to explore the possibilities of united action for Thursday. The Communist Youth, the delegates report, had agreed to all the slogans except the last one. The delegation had thereupon agreed to omit the

"offending" slogan. When they announced this to the Assembly there was an unholy rumpus.

"Mandate exceeded", they were told again and again. An overwhelming vote was taken dissociating the meeting from the actions of its delegates and pledging support for the controversial slogan. The delegates were instructed to contact the Communist Youth again, informing them of the decision: "We will march separately, if necessary. We will carry the slogans of our choice".

The posters were made. Next day the slogan, "The factories to the workers", was taken up again and again by the crowd. Various papers carried pictures of comrades carrying this poster. It was shown on the television newsreel. The message had been taken into tens of thousands of working class homes.

Today, there has been a further extension of the strike. 35,000 metal workers in the Senne valley have downed tools. The strike has spread to the engineering

works of Peugeot, Raguenaux, Metallurgia, Rateau, Acomal and Standard Triumph. It also spread at Ypres, at Courtrai and at Alost. The furniture workers at Malines and both boot and shoe operatives and textile workers at Termonde have joined the strike. There have been massive demonstrations at Bruges and at Ghent, where 10,000 demonstrators paraded in the streets.

There were several violent scuffles with the police. At Namur a gendarme told the strikers:

“You can have another Grace-Berleur, if you want one!”²

At Herstal, an industrial suburb of Liege, 5,000 strikers assembled to hear Lambion, the secretary of the local metal workers federation. At Liege 2,000 railway workers walked through the streets and then paraded in front of the railway station singing the Internationale, 15,000 workers assembled in the industrial town of Huy, 8,000 at Waremmé. At Charleroi, a recently arrived comrade tells us, the strikers had formed enormous queues outside the Post Office, where a few scabs are still working, under heavy police protection. Any genuine customers arriving had been sent to the end of the queue, where they soon lost patience. One by one, the strikers had entered the Post Office to buy ten centime (halfpenny) stamps, each holding out a bank note and telling the scab to hurry up and give them change. “That’s what you’re there for, isn’t it?” they had asked.

BRUSSELS, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 29.

10.00 am

By 10.00 am, an enormous crowd has already assembled in front of the Maison du Peuple, the headquarters of the Socialist Party, of the Cooperatives and of the Mutual Aid Societies.

Together with the FGTB unions these three organizations constitute the Action Commune which is "running" the strike. Here are the working people of Brussels in their thousands: metal workers and engineers from the "red" suburb of Forest, railway workers, Government and municipal employees, shop girls and white collar workers from all over the city, old and young, seasoned veterans and people participating in this sort of thing for the first time, all of them in their opposition to the latest Government proposals, all of them determined to say,

"No! It will not always be at our expense that they solve their problems". It is an impressive sight. The crowd swarms over the pavements, overflows into the neighbouring streets.

Vendors selling Le Peuple (journal of the Socialist Party), La Wallonie (journal of the socialist trade unions of the Liege area), Le Drapeau Rouge (journal of the Communist Party) and La Gauche (journal of the Socialist Party "left" are all doing a roaring trade. The crowd is in good humour. People buy all the papers they can lay their hands on, discuss them, avid for news, happy at the sight of their own multitude.

Loudspeakers are fitted on the window-sills of the Maison du Peuple, Trade Union and Party leaders address the crowd, assure it that they will fight to a finish, that they will not compromise, that the iniquitous law cannot be amended, that it must be rejected wholesale, that Government propaganda is spreading, that victory is assured and that the Government cannot but be impressed at the numerical strength and self-discipline of the thousands of demonstrators. The crowd listens happily in the pale winter sunshine. Contingents from some of the big cities (Ghent, Antwerp, Liege) march up the street, singing the Internationale, and are loudly applauded. Finally the procession sets off socialist parliamentarians and provincial delegations in the lead, a broad river of red flags and posters denouncing the law in Flemish, overflowing its banks, lapping up small streams of demonstrators joining it at various points.

Slowly the procession proceeds to the fringes of the so-called neutral zone, where Parliament is situated and within which demonstrators are not permitted. The zone is guarded by barbed wire and crammed with mounted police, troops in jeeps, detachments of gendarmerie, water-lorries with pressure hose equipment, etc. A very small delegation of the Action Commune is allowed to enter the zone and is received by the Prime Minister. The main procession continues through the main streets, growing in volume from minute to minute. It passes in front of a number of big banks and finance houses. The slogan, "The bankers must pay", is taken up by thousands of demonstrators and must be heard in the most remote offices or crypts. The windows of several banks are bombarded with stones and large bolts, with which many demonstrators seem extraordinarily well supplied. The police lining the pavement look

on, quite helpless. On one occasion two policemen advance towards a demonstrator carrying a large brick. An angry growl from the crowd sends them scurrying back, as fast as their legs can take them. Some of the missiles thrown do not reach their targets, but hit the masonry between the windows and on to the pavement. So confident is the crowd in its numbers that demonstrators come and pick up their projectiles at the feet of the policemen, pocketing them for later use. The relation of forces is rather different than last night, outside the Post Office.

The official socialist press commented as follows: "After ten days of an extremely hard strike, Thursday's demonstrators had no particular bad feelings towards the shopkeepers in the city centre. If the windows were broken of a few enterprises representing big business, it's because the demonstrators were fully aware whence was coming the aggression threatening their social conquests". Which, from the mouthpiece of social democracy, is quite an admission!

The procession proceeds joyfully through a number of lesser streets to emerge into an enormous boulevard, the Botanique, where it turns sharply to descend into the centre of the city. The sight is unforgettable. Marching twenty or thirty abreast, occupying the whole width of the boulevard, the procession extends as far back as the eye can see. The Internationale rends the air again and again. Many young people are now in the very front rows. They sing as if they mean every word of it. Here is the answer, I cannot help thinking, to those who assert that youth is non-political, that the proletariat no longer exists, that it has suffered disintegration through capitalist prosperity or assimilation into the structure of capitalist society. The slogan, "The factories to the workers", is taken

up again and again encountering each time a growing echo. The most popular slogan however is undoubtedly "Eyskens, to the gallows".

After a further hour of marching through the shopping area, bedecked with forlorn looking Christmas decorations, the procession reaches the Place Fontainas, where a mass rally was to have taken place. The speakers are already waiting all smiles, with their microphones and their flags, on an elevated dais. The continuation of the street is barred by a double row of stewards: this is intended to be the dispersal point. The head of the procession has now been taken over by the Socialist Youth and a number of young militants from Liege and Antwerp.

They have been discussing for the last two hours. More marches? More speeches? What next? How can we intervene? What does the crowd really want? Is it one crowd or several crowds? Half a mile further on, beyond the barrage of stewards, lies the main Post Office with its two or three hundred massively protected scabs.

A new slogan bursts forth: "A l'action! A l'action!" Enough speeches! The procession ignores the call to stop coming from the loudspeakers but marches right up to the stewards, cutting through them as if they did not exist. Three hundred, four hundred, now five hundred people have broken the barrier. The stewards, helped by the trade union officials and parliamentarians, succeed in re-establishing it. Twenty or thirty comrades from the cut off section at the head of the procession are promptly dispatched behind the cordon. Again the slogans ring out and again the crowd swarm through the barrier. The flood can no longer be contained. Thousands of people turn their backs on the Place Fontainas and surge towards the Post Office.

The following day the socialist press was to describe the incident as follows: "The demonstrators, having reached the Place Fontainas, did not stop as had been anticipated but carried on towards the Midi, which was guarded by powerful gendarmerie detachments". In fact such was the pressure from the rank and file that the paper even had to endorse what happened: "This was not the result of activities of excited agitators. The flood tide, which although it may at times take on violent forms, is always inspired by legitimate motives".

The procession raggedly advances on the Post Office. A "black" tram is spotted in a side street by some demonstrators who immediately give chase to it,

disrupting the procession still further. The conductor accelerates, fleeing for his life and, disregarding all safety regulations, hurtles along the rails, nearly running over several people in the process. He just escapes.

The comrades in front then stop. The ranks reform. A crowd can show immense Self-discipline when striving for objectives of its own choice. The stragglers and those who had given chase to the tram are reabsorbed. The compact procession moves on. The police have obviously been taken as much by surprise as have the organizers of the demonstration. Only some thirty mounted gendarmes and a few dozen on foot line the front of the building. Boos greet the gendarmes. The horses rear and throw off two of their riders as the crowd shower bolts and thunder-flashes into the ranks of the police. The crowd cheers ironically. The gendarmes do not attempt to disrupt the procession at this stage and are left alone by the crowd. At the Post Office every window is broken at street level and many on the first floor.

The stones rain into the building for at least ten minutes. Under the impotent gaze of about fifty extremely frightened policemen, demonstrators seize bins, full to the brim with the uncleared refuse of a week, and discharge their content through the broken windows into the offices and onto the desks of the scabs.

Some of the demonstrators then disperse, but other contingents march through side streets, rejoining the tail of the procession and thus coming in front of the Post Office a second time.

A postal bus, of the kind used to escort scabs into the depot, is turned over.

Finally, hastily summoned reinforcements of mounted and foot police appear and succeed in clearing the street. It requires drawn swords and the threatening display of loaded guns to achieve this end. The crowd straggles back to the Place Fontainas where they are addressed by Gedhof the trade union delegate from Sabena airline.

The speaker tells the demonstrators that sixty-five percent of the Sabena personnel are on strike but that Mr. Dieu, the manager, has just issued an instruction to the staff announcing the strictest measures against the strikers. "Mr. Dieu still thinks himself in the Congo", the speaker said. "For years he has been ordering coloured people about there; now he thinks he can do the same with us". The speaker announced a demonstration, for the following day, to go to

Sabena headquarters. This was the demonstration in which the first fatal casualty of the strike was to occur.

LIEGE, THURSDAY DECEMBER 29

Arrived here about 5.00 pm. The strike is far more widespread than in Brussels. All public transport has been at a standstill for several days. Many of the big stores are closed. Others are obeying the "request" of the FGTB and are opening only 10.00 am to 1.00 pm. Groups of about a dozen policemen scurry about the streets. Groups of strikers congregate in tight little knots arguing. Many people have gathered outside the offices of the local FGTB paper, La Wallonie. Some read the latest issue pasted on the boards. Others examine the front window of the premises, damaged a few nights ago when right-wing hooligans smashed the panes with a bottle.

La Wallonie has played an important role in the strike. It has been the mouthpiece of the most militant section of the trade union apparatus. It has given publicity and support to the strike, describing in considerable detail and with many pictures the main meetings of strikers, and has reported in full all the statements of the Socialist Party and FGTB leaders. It has attempted, from above, to co-ordinate the struggle, announcing meetings and places where socialist papers may be collected.

It has repeatedly denounced and exposed the falsifications of the bourgeois press.

On December 24 the paper printed a special call to the troops: to fraternize with the strikers, to refuse to be used as blacklegs, and not be traitors to their class. This appeal, one of the most dramatic documents to have emerged from the great struggle of the Belgian working class, truly enraged the Government. That same evening on orders from Brussels, officers of the judicial police accompanied by the judge and a royal attorney (procureur du roi) were busy in the most undignified task of tearing down posters, forcing the locks of display panel boxes, etc. An order had gone out for the paper to be "seized". The officers then erupted into the papers offices and took all the issues they could find. In the early hours of Christmas Day visits and searches of homes were ordered.

Accompanied by gendarmes, parties set out to raid the homes of trade union officials and militants; others descended on trade union premises and bookshops seizing copies of the December 24 issue.

In its next issue the paper spoke up quite boldly: "La Wallonie has no intention of keeping quiet. It will continue, as before, to fight for the good cause. It will not be dissuaded from doing its duty, even if threatened by seizure". The seizure had interesting repercussions. The

"forbidden" article was taken up by two other socialist papers, Le Monde du Travail and Le Peuple, which published it in full - and were thereupon promptly "seized" in their turn!

Teams of young socialists and trade unionists then plastered the walls and hoardings of the city with leaflets reproducing the appeal. Some of these had been scraped off by officialdom but many remained.

I am beginning to learn my way about. I ask for "La Populaire" (the colloquial term for the Maison du Peuple). At this stage of the struggle I sense it will be a focal point. The ground floor is an enormous restaurant, run on co-operative lines, where free coffees are served to strikers at all times of the day or night. Groups of comrades from the unions and the Socialist Party are in permanent session in the various offices upstairs. An enormous red flag hangs from the first floor windows.

I tell them my business. Several comrades kindly agree to take me to various places. While waiting I talk to several people at the tables downstairs. First a refuse collector, a strapping great man with a keen sense of humour. "We stopped work on the very first day. In a sense we started all this. But they couldn't take it. Dirt frightens them. We were requisitioned on the fourth day. An armed gendarme on a motorbike called at each of our homes with a summons. We had to report next day at our usual depot. And I'd told the missus not to open the door! The cop barged in and just dumped the paper on the table. If he doesn't come we'll lock him up, he said. They passed a law in 1789 entitling them to do this. We discussed it amongst ourselves. We don't want to be in clink on great days like this. Sort of an unsanitary place, we felt. We couldn't be much help behind bars. So we went to work next day...wearing these!" He showed me the posters they had slipped over their dungarees One said

"Requisitioned by force", the other "Solidarity with the strikers", "No to the loi unique". The photos were published next day in all the socialist press.

I next spoke to a professional man employed by the municipality. "This is the most vicious onslaught on rights and conditions which it has taken us years of struggle to acquire. This law is the last straw. Why should ordinary people always have to foot the bill? They will agree no longer. In a country like Belgium no government can rule without the consent of the working class. We will win!" His quiet assurance, I thought, promised untold difficulties for anyone trying to sell out the struggle.

A young metal worker from the industrial suburb of Seraing tells me of interesting developments in his area. Old people are short of coal. It is a bitterly cold winter. The coal merchants have no stocks. The union now looks after all cases of hardship. The coal

merchant comes to the union. They issue him with a permit, allowing him to collect a given quantity of coal from authorized persons. Without this certificate no deliveries can take place.

"A good idea for after the strike", he muses, "we have accounts to settle!"

A railway worker tells me of the events that morning outside the Gare des Guillemins, the main Liege railway station. In the very early hours a scab postal van had arrived, bringing in large bundles of rightwing papers from Brussels. The van had intended to discharge its contents into a strike-bound militarily guarded postal depot at the station. It had been spotted by the railwaymen's picket, before it could reach the depot. Its contents had made an enormous bonfire at which the pickets had been able to warm themselves.

6.30 pm

A comrade collects me and we proceed to the Wallonie premises. The streets are poorly lit.

Current is scarce and supplies may fail, we are told, at any moment. A few young comrades are guarding the side entrance to the building, the only one in use. They each hold an iron bar. They anticipate further trouble. Some people, I am told, have been whipped into a white rage against the strikers and their press, by the incitements of the bourgeois papers. Le Matin (of Antwerp) and Flandre Liberale had called on the Government to become even tougher in relation to "the riot". Le Libre Belgique had screamed, "Down with Collard, Major and Leburton) (moderate socialist and trade union leaders). The wireless must no longer be put at the disposal of the revolutionaries. Daily these papers were exhorting their readers to be ruthless with the strikers, who were presented as the scum of the earth.

The young guards were taking no chances. My escort was fortunately known to them.

Upstairs one of the editors gave me some photos and a file of back numbers of the paper.

With a chuckle he went to a cupboard and produced a copy of the "seized" issue! "Look after this one", he said, "it could become a historical number'.

"Tell your friends what you have seen. This is a magnificent movement. Every working man and woman in this area is involved in this struggle. I am now well over fifty. I never thought I would see anything like it. Working people in Britain must be told the true facts". I promised to do my best. We went downstairs again. We found it considerably easier to leave the building than to enter it!

8.00 pm

In the car of one of the comrades of the Liege Socialist Party, we visit a number of the Maisons du Peuple around Liege. These are very similar to the Working Men's Clubs in Britain. Almost overnight they became local strike headquarters. Here the strikers check in each day, or alternate days, according to region or occupation. Here the strike benefits are paid. Although they vary from area to area the average is around £2 per week. Solidarity funds are pouring in on an increasing scale from all over the country and free food is distributed here to families in need. The clubs are also distribution centres for the working class papers. Picket rotas are planned and other important local decisions are taken in these halls. Before the strike the clubs had mainly a recreational function. Many ran football teams or had teams of pigeon fanciers. Some showed "socialist" Elms regularly. In the Maison du Peuple of Saint-Gilles, which we are now visiting the film *Salt of the Earth* had just been shown.

This had inspired the idea of the women's picket, walking silently round and round in front of the Liege Post office from 7.00 to 9.00 am every morning. A great welcome meets us at all these places. Everyone is anxious that the British working class get to know the facts. "The papers will all tell lies about us", I am told again and again. Naturally I agree. The Belgian wireless and television are violently opposed to the strike. I am just in time to see a TV

version of the events I had personally witnessed in Brussels that very morning.
Slick editing

ensured that the rowdiest episodes were shown in a very fragmentary manner. No pictures appeared showing the enormous size of the demonstration and discreet cutting had ensured that the brutality of the gendarmerie did not appear on the screen. I have a short discussion with a local trade union militant, a lorry driver. "The movement must develop. We have done well so far. But we cannot stop. Il faut aller jusqu'au bout".³

A local Socialist Party official tells me the Party will fight to the end. Another comrade informs me that even Senator Dehousse is on their side. He is a local boy who has made good in a big way. He is apparently well known in the United Europe movement. His speeches at Strasbourg are very polished ones. I point out

that Europe is not united now. Half of it is backing Eyskens. The other half is on the side of men like themselves. They all agree. A little way from there, at the bottom of the Rue St. Laurent, we pass over a bridge, spanning the Brussels-Liege railway line. A lone soldier is sitting on the stone parapet, a tommy gun on one side and a thermos flask on the other. He is talking to a group of three railwaymen, who have just brought him hot soup. When the men have left I walk up to him, I tell him who I am. He seems quite friendly. He is about 28, fair-haired, Flemish. He told me that he spoke to the local people every night. He was called back from Germany three days ago. No, he is not a conscript. He has done his time, but re-enlisted. His father is a bricklayer, now working at Namur. What he thinks of the strike? "They must see no other way!" Has he heard of the appeal, in the seized issue of La Wallonie? Of course! Well? He looks me straight in the eyes:

"je ne tirerai jamais sur pareil à moi!" 4 All, after this, is anti-climax. Yes, they discuss the strike in his mess. Some are for, some against. The officers? As you'd expect! I've orders to speak to no one, he suddenly says, abruptly changing his tone, as a military lorry appears at the other end of the bridge.

Leo Collard, leader of the Socialist Party, told a Press Conference today that "the strike will last as long as necessary, even if trade union resources dry up. Common Action will itself start strike payments on Saturday. This will be a first instalment, the extent of which will vary...according to the man's occupation and to the number of days he has been on strike.

The loi unique cannot be the basis of a solution. The government has conceived of this law as an organic whole. . .we cannot see how a compromise could be reached by amending its details. We are struggling, quite simply, for its withdrawal".5

Bold words. But verbal assaults hardly topple governments. Also today: a gigantic rally of 50,000 workers in Antwerp. The procession, headed by hundreds of red flags, had crossed the town and paraded through the working class districts followed by all available local police.

All shops had shut. One of the main slogans had been "Catholic workers, join us". A convoy of gendarmes hastily dispatched from Brussels had then arrived and had attacked the tail of the procession with tear gas grenades as it was beginning to disperse.

LIEGE, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 30

6.00 am

With the picket, outside the Vuillemins station. The postal sheds are the key points. At least eighty lads are picketing. They are cheerful: yesterday mornings events warmed both hearts and hands!

Nothing very much happens. No postal van is likely to run the gauntlet again. And it's very early for Messieurs the Gendarmes to be out.

The picket is again of very mixed composition: postmen, railwaymen, engineers, even a miner. I speak to him. He works in a small pit, at Milmort, employing 450 men at the face and 150 on top. They joined the strike on Wednesday, December 21 - as soon as they heard that the municipal employees in Liege had walked out. "Nothing could stop us. Agitation against the Law had been building up for weeks. The men were all prepared for action The

union leaders were dithering about when, and how, and for how long...It was like a tidal wave. Within hours the whole coalfield was out. The official decision came 24 hours later!"

Other pickets gave the same story: immediate and massive solidarity action of the rank and file, then hasty "official" decisions, ratifying the established fact.

Nevertheless once the official machinery got moving it gave a further impetus to the struggle.

The Liege-Huy-Waremme Regional Congress of the FGTB, meeting on December 22, called for "total and immediate cessation of work in all sectors, in production and distribution and in both private and public enterprises". It pledged that the local FGTB organizations would remain united "until final victory was assured".

8.00 am

Over a hundred women are picketing outside the Liege main Post Office. They ' walk in silent procession up and down the pavement in front of a small main entrance through which the scabs must pass. Twenty yards away stand the menfolk, ominously watching lest they be molested. Three large policemen and two armed soldiers stand in front of the door. They look extremely stupid and quite embarrassed as the girls circle round them, as if they did not exist.

The picket seems effective. Few scabs confront the cold irony of these determined women.

On the first day, about thirty of the sixty women pickets had been arrested and roughly thrown into two black Marias. There was an unholy rumpus because one of them was the deputy Fontaine-Borguet. They were all promptly released. . . and proceeded straight back to the picket line. Next day, over a hundred women were picketing. Today, about 150. My thoughts went to other pickets. There women had been arrested, none of whom had enjoyed the benefits of parliamentary immunity!

10.30 am

A mass meeting is being held in the big hall of the Maison du Peuple, which is packed with about 1,200 local government personnel, postmen, clerks from the births and deaths registry, tramwaymen, road sweepers, girls from the public library, the manual and white-collar staff of innumerable departments of local government, both large and small. The speakers on the platform look self-important and self-satisfied. The meeting starts half-an-hour late. The crowd waits patiently. The audience are flattered about their "heroic struggle, their unity, their discipline", but no plan is developed. They listen in silence. Three passages evoke applause: reference to a possible march on Brussels, a statement that "although calm and dignified today each one of us is prepared for more active forms of struggle tomorrow", and a peroration "that Belgium had been misruled for long enough and that it was high time the working class took Belgium's fate into its own hands".

At the end of the lengthy meeting, many of the audience drift down to the "gents" in the basement. Moneyboxes adorn the walls with the inscription: "Now remember that strike fund!"

12.30 pm

After the meeting several hundred of the audience drift to the Place St. Paul, a secluded square in front of the FGTB headquarters. Here they are joined by about a thousand strikers who had previously been aimlessly strolling through the town. A crowd of about 2,000 is soon waiting for something to happen. But nothing happens. In the trade union headquarters, the discussion is doubtless proceeding along its orderly course. The situation calls for some kind of lead, the absence of which is painfully obtrusive. Suddenly a group of quite young workers start chanting rhythmically: "A l'action!" The slogan spread. In minutes the whole square is resounding to its echo. Startled heads pop out of windows of the trade union building. Some thirty youngsters rush the front door shouting: "We'll shake them up". Part of the audience cheers. Others laugh. Others loudly disapprove. A minor official, standing on

the steps, improvises a discourse on...discipline. A leading official appears and skilfully endorses the crowd's desire for action. "It must be united action though. . . Let us march to the railway station". The crowd agree enthusiastically. Their idea of a march on to the station obviously differs from that of their leaders. They set off shouting: "A l'action" and "The parachutists to the factory bench". One can feel the temperature rising. The procession advances for about a mile. It is then overtaken by an official trade union van, complete with loudspeaker equipment. The van draws up. The procession stops. Posters and banners are handed down to the demonstrators.

"No, to the Law", "Eyskens, resign", "The Walloon country has had enough", the banners of a week ago. The lads in the front ranks sheepishly take them. The "leaders" launch their slogans into the loudspeaker. The crowd takes them up half-heartedly.

They cannot really compete. The procession reaches the large open space in front of the station, circles round it twice - well away from the gendarmes lining the pavement - and proceeds, in confused and perplexed silence, to disappear into a small street, leading away from the station.

3.00 pm

A young comrade has agreed to drive me to Seraing, the big industrial suburb of Liege. This is Renard's home ground, the much publicized "heart of the strike". Here live thousands of steel workers and engineers who work at the giant Cockerill- Ougree industrial complex. We drive past miles of plant - enormous sheds, deserted furnaces, pressing rooms and smelting ovens. I was later to learn that many factories in this area had in fact been closed down by employers, as soon as they had seen how widespread the strike was going to be.

Too bad for the odd scab who might have wished to work. Too bad for their sacred "right to labour". But much safer, no doubt, from the employers' point of view.

There is danger to valuable equipment when a town is full of strikers and the plants all have pickets at their gates. This is a sort of strike-cum-lockout, by mutual consent. , A thin plume of smoke still emerges from some chimneys. By mutual consent, too, the maintenance men had been kept at work. The threat to withdraw the maintenance staff is Renard's trump card, the high point of his industrial strategy. The weapon however is a double-edged one. Several workers viewed its use with misgiving. "We may win the strike and inherit a desert".

Cockerill-Ougree employ over 25,000 men. If the furnaces went out thousands would be out of work for months. The strike in Seraing is total. Only food shops are open - and this only at times allowed by the unions. Everything is extraordinarily quiet. Not a policeman, not a picket in sight. No women or children in the streets. Here and there groups of men stand at the crossroads, doing nothing. We reach the Maison du Peuple which at least shows some signs of activity. My friend and I are brought into a tiny office where we meet three members of the Strike Committee, all three union officials. Elected committees are exceptional.

They look at us cagily. "Yes, the strike is quite solid. Hadn't I read the papers?" "Everything is quite orderly in Seraing. What did I expect?" Would the present methods of struggle be sufficient to make the Government capitulate? "Well, we'd have to see about that. To each day its tasks, however!" A march on Brussels? "Well, that would have to be a national decision. They were just

holding the fort at Seraingl"

A significant paradox? The strike at its most complete and the streets as quiet as early on a Sunday morning. On the home ground of the FGTB "left", the apparatus is in full and undisputed control. I have an uneasy impression that the wheels seem to be turning in the air.

5.00 pm

We return from Seraing along another route, close to the river, and enter Liege through the densely populated suburbs of Outre-Meuse. As we turn sharply on to the quai along the river Ourthe, an unforgettable sight suddenly meets our gaze. Three hundred yards on, a bridge spans the river. A procession is crossing the bridge, three enormous red flags at its head. Half the bridge is empty, half is black with people. The strains of the Internationale can be heard in the distance.

We quickly join up with the procession. It was unlike any other I had seen, being composed almost solely of young people. It had formed spontaneously as soon as the news had reached Liege, of the death that morning in a Brussels demonstration, of a young painter. It was entirely "unofficial". A single, hastily made poster was carried at its head: "Eyskens, assassin.

In Brussels today: one dead, ten wounded". Within twenty minutes the procession had doubled its size. Through the narrow streets of the working class quarters it wound its angry way. A single slogan fiercely chanted by twelve or fifteen hundred youngsters: "Eyskens, assassin! Eyskens, assassin!" A single song, sung with more passion than I have ever heard: the Internationale.

The procession reaches the square where stands the statue of Tchantches, the famous puppet of Walloon folklore. It stops. A youngster gets on to the base of the statue, and speaks his mind. "This is their real face. . . This is what faces us. What can we do? How can we make our will effective? In the Party and Union headquarters, they talk. The Government waits.

Time is not on our side. I have marched so much I have holes in my shoes. We should do something more". Others follow him. The idea of a march on Brussels is greeted with applause. But who will organize it? The Party and the Unions? But they don't want such a march. Or they only use one as a safety valve. "What

can we do, here? We can disseminate the idea of the March. We must ourselves contact other young people, in other towns. No one will do it for us".

Others speak in the same vein. "The Government's hands are red with blood. The hands of our leaders are crippled with arthritis". The procession returns to town, lodges a protest at the town hall, "the only practical thing we can do just now, comrades", and disperses. Heavy rain begins to fall.

Today there have been mass meetings at Mons and Charleroi. At Mons a meeting announced the previous evening was attended by 10,000 workers. Many had had to walk for hours to get to the town, most roads having been either unpaved by the strikers or blocked by tree trunks.

A socialist leader, Marcel Busieau, stated, "it is alleged we might be ready to negotiate with the Government on the basis of a withdrawal of parts of the loi unique. This is false. We will fight to the end for its complete withdrawal". The Monde du Travail described this speech as

"wildly applauded".

So much for the record. The strikers then "visited" a bank where scabs were still at work.

There was no scuffle. The manager agreed to close down immediately.

At Charleroi, a gigantic rally of 45,000 strikers shouts, "to Brussels, to Brussels".

The speaker Josse van Eynde asks them, "only heed the official slogans of the Action Commune". A resolution, in which readers will detect interesting undertones, is read over the microphone and "approved by acclamation":

Today, Friday, December 50, 45,000 workers who, for the past ten days have of their own free will left their factories, building sites, mines, schools and offices. .proclaim: a) their firm opposition to the loi unique;

b) their demand that it simply be withdrawn; c) that they have absolute confidence in their trade union organizations and in the Action Commune; d)

that they mandate their leaders to express their wishes and defend their interests;

e) that they reject with contempt the campaign of lies, intimidation and diversion launched by the Government, "its" radio, "its" Press, "its" television and "its" valetsof the Confederation Syndicale Chretienne.

To all this we oppose the following slogan: "The Strike Continues". Why did the "leaders"

need reassuring?

LIEGE, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31

10.00 am

Theo Dejace, Communist Party deputy for Liege, is addressing an open air meeting in the Place de la Republique Francaise. Leaflets were distributed the previous day. About 600

people listen. The speaker calls for daily public meetings of the organizations leading the strike, whence clear directives could be issued and where comments from the rank and file might be heard. There is too little contact he says, between the official organizations and the strikers. This he believes is regrettable. He warns the crowd against rowdies, drunkards, and

"leftists". The main task apparently is to prevent the new law from being voted on January 5.

Between now and then assemblies of strikers should daily send deputations to the homes of all Social- Christian deputies "to impress upon them that they should comply with the wishes of their electors rather than obey the orders issued by the Banks and Government".

An official Communist Party leaflet (Two Communist Proposals for a Total and Rapid Victory) is distributed at the meeting. It ends as follows: If despite the popular will, the reactionary majority in Parliament were to continue its support for the loi unique, the struggle would continue. Let the Government have no doubt on this matter!

A Parliament which opposed itself in so flagrant a manner to public opinion would have to be dissolved without delay!

The strike is powerful. Let there be no irresponsible acts, that might weaken it!

The crowd listens without great enthusiasm. The labels are different. The medicine tastes the same.

The Communist Party has played no important role in the present upsurge of the Belgian working class. Its rank-and-file members have doubtless fought

shoulder to shoulder with Socialist Party militants and with thousands of struggling workers who do not belong to either organization, but its leadership and in particular its press have played, to say the least, a ludicrous role.

On December 20 the Communist Party had issued a call for a 24-hour general strike (having previously demanded only a national demonstration on that day). The self-appointed

"leadership" proved quite out of touch with the militancy of the rank and file. The movement has now lasted four weeks!

On December 27 the Communist Party deputy Gaston Moulin addressed a letter to Mr.

Kronacker, President of the Chamber of Deputies, in which "he sought permission to question the Prime Minister of the Interior. . . on the utilization of the Army and on the recall of reservists. . . on the arbitrary arrests of strikers and militant workers, on the arbitrary

'seizures' of leaflets and papers and on the dissemination of false news through official channels".

Does it really take a general strike to make the Communists aware of the class nature of the Capitalist State, and to drive them to "protest" about it. . . in Parliament?

On December 28, the Drapeau Rouge splashed on its front page that the Liege demonstrations demanded of the Liberal and Social-Christian deputies that they "obey the will of their electors". The paper hoped that in the next few days closer contacts would be established between the population and the (right-wing) deputies, "who had become isolated from their electors".

The paper reported that the Liege Federation of the Communist Party considered that "the Liege deputies Harmal, Herbiet, Olislaeger, Deslenay and Jeunehomme must answer the call addressed to them by the demonstrators and must finally understand that their stubbornness is an obstacle to the rapid and democratic solution to the conflict'.

On December 29 the Drapeau Rouge was even more explicit: it titled in big letters "An Essential Objective of the Strikers: To Recall to the Liberal and

Christian Deputies that they are in Parliament to Accomplish the Popular Will!" Well, well! And we, around the Agitator, who always thought they were in Parliament to defend the class interests of the bourgeoisie...

And what does the Belgian Communist Party see as the outcome of the strike?

This is made quite explicit in a draft law submitted to Parliament by Communist Party deputies Gaston Moulin and Theo Dejace. This demanded: a) the control of the banks, of the insurance companies and of big business [no specification as to who does the "controlling"];

b) the creation of a Committee for National Investment; and c) the creation of a National Investment Fund to allow the rapid and harmonious development of the economy, to ensure full employment and to permit a rapid rise in the material and cultural level of the people.

Somehow I doubt the Borinage miners are struggling as they are for ends of this kind.

LIEGE, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 31

10.00 am

A procession to mourn the death of the Brussels painter has been hastily arranged by the Action Commune. Instructions go out that the procession is to be a silent one. No posters. No slogans. Only red flags draped with black will be allowed.

"This is a heaven-sent opportunity for them", a young bank clerk tells me. "It will enable them to contain the movement a little longer. Without this excuse for a silent march there would have been real violence today".

December 31 is usually a bumper day for the big stores. They were to have been allowed (in agreement with the FG TB) to remain open from 10.00 am to 6.00 pm. But when the news reached Liege yesterday that a man had been killed in Brussels, the Liege FC.TB

immediately issued a request: all shops were to remain closed the following day as a sign of mourning. Today all the big stores are shut. Some have big posters in their windows: "In agreement with the FG TB and as a sign of mourning we will not open on Saturday, December 31". The solicitude of the multiple store millionaires for a humble Brussels painter is truly touching. And the size and temper of the crowd in the streets is impressive.

The procession sets off in silence - about 6,000 strong. For the first half-hour no slogans are shouted, no songs sung. People exchange experiences, discuss the events of the past few days.

I meet a young worker from Cockerill-Ougree, the big steel works outside Liege. Lucien works on the night shift, in one of the tin-plating shops. He gives me the most vivid account

of the onset of the movement I have yet heard. The unions had first called a national demonstration for December 15. This was the day of the royal wedding. It had officially been decreed a paid holiday. Under pressure from the ranks the demonstration had been brought forward to December 14. A massive strike took place that afternoon. Fifty thousand workers assembled at the Place St.-Lambert, in Liege. Many of the posters demanded a general strike.

Renard had spoken. He had concluded with the ambiguous statement: "Consider yourselves mobilized on a war footing. . . and wait for official directives".

The meeting had been noisy and at times angry. A member of the Socialist Youth had then climbed on to the balcony and attempted to address the crowd. He had been prevented from doing so by Party officials. PSB deputy Simon Paque had seized the microphone from him and had again addressed the crowd. "Remain ready for action. The meeting is closed".

I asked Lucien what had happened where he worked, on that famous Tuesday, December 20.

"Things moved immediately. Hundreds of workers left the central shops. They went from shop to shop, getting the lads to down tools. Three thousand men gathered in the new Thomas steel plant among valuable equipment! It was dangerous but it's one of the biggest available places, Several fights took place with the trade union delegates. They were trying to get the men back to work until official instructions had been received. Meetings were promised for the next day. Why not now, the men had asked. Many remained on the premises to prevent the night shift from coming on. Only half the factory worked that night. By Wednesday morning it had come to a complete standstill. The Metal Workers Federation of the Liege FGTB called us all out officially as from the Thursday'.

The procession has now crossed the river. The first incidents occur as we pass a large store that has not complied with the FGTB request. A group of angry demonstrators enter threateningly. Stewards hastily intervene. They will talk to the manager. The demonstrators reluctantly walk out, but wait outside. After a few minutes, the shutters are closed. The manager has decided to participate in the mourning.

A little further on we pass a shop displaying a poster of the "Union of the Middle Classes".

This is headed "FREEDOM FIRST". The freedom referred to is the freedom of scabs to work and of the Government to use all means to break the strike. The owner of the shop is instructed to remove the poster. He takes one look at the crowd and immediately obeys.

Further on other shopkeepers start arguing. But not for long. If the offending posters do not disappear, the window-panes do. Noisily. The whole atmosphere

gradually changes. The demonstrators are now on the lookout for hostile posters and for open shops of any size.

Small shops are left strictly alone. Some of the stewards - notably those of the socialist students object to the transformation taking place. "Remember, comrades, this is a silent procession. You must obey the official instructions". But their protests are of little avail. The police lining the pavements are powerless, as in Brussels on Thursday morning. The Union of the Middle Classes is in for a bad day. Instinctively the crowd is becoming aware of its terrific strength.

1.00 pm

I am with a group of comrades associated with the weekly La Gauche. They have no illusions on the limitations of the present leadership of both Party and Unions. But they still seem to think that genuine solutions are possible within the framework of these organizations. The idea that they should themselves get together and issue a leaflet saying quite openly what they think strikes them as sectarian. Ernest Mandel, editor of La Gauche, writes in a special issue of the paper (December 24); The workers fear that if the Government fell as a result of the present social crisis the Socialist Party would enter a new coalition "so that the country should not become ungovernable". The immense majority of the strikers will only tolerate

such a reversal of the (parliamentary) alliances on two conditions: a) that the new government abandon the loi unique, i.e. not only the austerity measures in the social field but also the increases in indirect taxation; b) that the new ministerial programme should retain the essential features of the "reformes de structure".⁷

If these two conditions are not fulfilled one must be resolutely opposed to any socialist participation in the Government in order to end the strike. Mr. Mandel believes that these objectives might even be achieved through the bourgeois deputies. Under the heading

"Decisive Moments" he writes: "a new parliamentary majority in relation to the questions of withdrawing the loi unique and voting a law on fiscal reform and the 'reformes de structure'

could well emerge. It would only require that the Christian-Democrat deputies listen to the voices of their electors and, under the pressure of the strike, align themselves on the aspirations of those they represent". Thus speaks Trotskyism, at the height of a general strike...

3.00 pm

We are driving back to Brussels in a tiny Citroen. Episodes too numerous to record still jostle in my mind: the sympathy with the strikers shown by innumerable small shopkeepers and café' owners; the farmers supplying free vegetables to the Maisons du Peuple, for the communal soup kitchens; thousands of ordinary people discovering within themselves unlimited reserves of energy, initiative and devotion; men, women and children, many seriously short of sleep, active from dawn to dusk on the picket lines, as couriers, organizing relief participating in meetings, marches and demonstrations, all imbued with an indomitable determination to assert their collective will, all feeling for once that what they do, feel, think really matters, all dragged out of the anonymity and isolation of their daily lives and suddenly confronted with the heart-warming image of their numbers, their cohesion, their strength...

I remembered what a postman told me, on the picket line at Brussels. "Each Christmas we sell calendars to the people in our areas. They give generously. We often get, at this time, what amounts to two months' pay. We decided nevertheless to launch this fight on December 20. We knew we would not fight alone".

He was right, of course. Solidarity action was massive and not confined to other workers.

Early in the course of the strike, the Minister of the Interior had issued orders to all local bourgmestres (mayors) instructing them to report to the authorities all absences from work of local government employees. On December 26, the 62 socialist bourgmestres from the Liege district met and unanimously decided "to take no account of the orders of the minister". They proclaimed their complete solidarity with the strikers. Similar statements were made by meetings of the socialist bourgmestres of the Verviers, Nivelles, Charleroi, Namur, Borinage and other districts.

At Huy the Common Action Committee had even concluded an agreement with the local shopkeepers federation, who had declared itself against the loi unique and had made financial contributions to the local strike fund. In Seraing, even the priests had, on Christmas day, read messages in their Churches expressing

solidarity with the strikers. These messages were in marked contrast to the appeal of Cardinal van Roey, Archbishop of Malines, exhorting the strikers to return to work.

I recall how in a street in Liege, working men had been repairing a burst main. On their van a large poster: "We are strikers. We are working of our own free will, with the permission of our union, and out of consideration for the local population". Local Government had broken down. Local initiative and self-reliance had replaced it. Here was the true face of the working class the harbinger of a new society.

I recall above all a discussion with two young comrades one evening in Liege. One worked in a machine tool factory, the other at the Ateliers Jaspar, making lifts. "The leaders tell us do this, do that. We don't know any longer. We, the workers, ought to decide. We are the ones that get shot and wounded. We are the ones they put in gaol. There will be no sell out if we decide how we should struggle".

Editor's note

The general strike lasted until 21 January, when the 120,000 metal workers from the Liege and Charleroi regions finally returned to work. The Eyskens government was compelled to dissolve Parliament and in the ensuing election the governmental coalition was defeated.

Important sections of the loi unique were never implemented and there was no decline in the real wages of the working class. On the other hand, the new government was a coalition of the Social Christians (Parti Social Chretien), not only the majority in the previous administration but Eyskens's own party and the Socialists (PSB); and not even any of the reformes de structure that had been envisaged by Ernest Mandel and the left-wing of the PSB

materialized. For further details see Ernest Mandel, "The Dialectic of Class and Region in Belgium", New Left Review no. 20 (Summer 1963), esp. pp. 24-6; and Serge Simon, "The Belgian General Strike: The General Strike Day by Day", Revolutionary History VII, 1 (

1998).

From Belgium: the General strike, agitator/new generation pamphlet, January

1961

OCRed for libcom.org by Linda Towlson from the AK press book "for Workers Power" by Maurice Brinton. We heartily recommend you purchase this excellent book.



1. The Federation Generale des Travailleurs Belges is the equivalent of the Trade Union Congress. It differs however in that it has a number of semi-autonomous regional organizations, each comprising the representatives of various trades and occupations in a given area.



2. At Grace-Berleur, near Liege, three striking workers were shot dead by the gendarmerie in 1950, during the massive agitation against King Leopold.



3. "We must go to the very end of the road".



4. "I will never shoot at my own kind!"



5. La Wallonie, December 30, 1960.



6. Le Monde du Travail, December 31, 1960



7. By "reformes de structure" are meant a series of "transitional" demands. These, it is alleged, would without overthrowing capitalism wrest from it some of its commanding heights. Among these "reforms" are the control of the holding banks, the nationalization of power industries, a national economic plan and the constitution of a public National Investment Fund. We see no basic socialist

content in any of these demands.